Six

On the Representativeness of Voters

In this chapter we consider what we believe is a critical aspect of the potential *consequences* of turnout, and that is whether voters are representative of nonvoters with respect to their preferred policy positions. Most discussions of the consequences of turnout focus on whether changes in the partisanship of the voters lead to changes in who wins the election. We believe it is also important to consider the governance consequences of turnout. Who wins an election is obviously important in a representative democracy. But once elected, officials have some flexibility to define their policy agendas and their policy priorities in ways that go beyond partisanship. We have argued that elected officials respond to their electoral constituencies by pursuing the issues or policy preferences of those who cast ballots for them. In this respect, presidents respond not only to fellow partisans, but also to the more specific policy preferences of their supporters. This argument shifts the focus from how representative voters are of nonvoters with respect to demographic characteristics to how representative voters are of nonvoters with respect to policy preferences.[1]

The empirical evidence presented in the last several chapters suggests that the relative turnout rates of the wealthy and poor have been fairly constant over the past several decades, with perhaps a slight decrease in the relative turnout of the poor in the 1990s that has recovered since 2000. As we pointed out at the beginning of this book, theory suggests that poor individuals (specifically those below the median income level)

1. See Erikson and Tedin (2011, fig. 7:1) for a simple demonstration of the differences between the preferences of voters and nonvoters on economic issues.

will be inclined to favor policies that redistribute income, whereas rich voters (those above the median income level) will be opposed to policies that redistribute income. Given that nonvoters are disproportionately poor relative to voters, and have been since 1972, we expect to find sustained differences in the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters in presidential elections since 1972 on redistributive issues.

We briefly review the handful of studies that have addressed the question of the representativeness of voters, and then replicate some of Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) evidence for 1972 with 2008 data. We then test our expectations regarding the distinctiveness of voters' preferences using data from the 1972–2008 American National Election Studies (NES), as well as the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), comparing the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters on redistributive issues, as well as a variety of other policy issues.

6.1 The Conventional Wisdom

The centrality of elections to representative democracy—along with concerns regarding low turnout in American elections—would suggest that scholars might well pay special attention to whether voters' policy positions are representative of nonvoters'. Yet aside from Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), we have identified few studies that consider this key question, and their conclusions are fairly consistent with each other: there are surprisingly few and, in any case, only modest, differences in the policy preferences of voters and nonvoters.[2]

Conventional wisdom seems to have interpreted those findings as indicating that there are no differences between voters and nonvoters. This strict interpretation certainly emerges from Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) description of their data from 1972. After reporting a "slight" overrepresentation of Republicans among the voters, Wolfinger and Rosenstone examine citizens' preferences on seven issues (government guaranteeing jobs, medical insurance, bussing, abortion, legalizing marijuana, the role of women, and ideology) and observe, "All other political differences between voters and the general population are considerably smaller than this [partisan] gap of 3.7 percentage points. Moreover, these other differences, as slight as they are, do not have a consistent bias toward any particular political orientation. . . . In short, on these issues voters are virtually a carbon copy of the citizen population" (1980, 109).

2. We emphasize that we are considering policy preferences here, not candidate preferences. See Bennett & Resnick (1990); Ellis, Ura, & Ashley-Robinson (2006); Shaffer (1982); and Studlar & Welch (1986).

Bennett and Resnick's (1990) analysis of General Social Survey (1985), Gallup poll (1987), and American National Election Studies (1968–1988) data mirrors these conclusions for the most part, though they offer some evidence that conflicts with Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) observations of "small and statistically insignificant" differences between voters and the citizen population. Bennett and Resnick's analysis considers a broader range of the attitudinal characteristics of voters, such as patriotism and other measures of system support, attitudes toward political and social groups, and levels of political information. On these items, they too report that there are few differences and that nonvoters thus do not represent a threat to democracy.

However, on some of the same issue positions that Wolfinger and Rosenstone examined, as well as some additional policy preference measures, they note that findings are mixed. Few differences are observed on partisanship, ideology, and foreign policy positions. But on some domestic policies, "nonvoters and voters do not see eye to eye. Nonvoters are slightly more in favor of an increased government role in the domestic arena. They are more likely to oppose curtailing government spending for health and education services, and they are more likely to support government guarantees that everyone has a job and a good standard of living" (Bennett & Resnick 1990, 789–94).

In addition, Bennett and Resnick's analyses of voters' and nonvoters' opinions on spending for a set of eight domestic programs indicates that nonvoters are significantly more likely than voters to favor spending. Thus, the conventional wisdom that who votes does not matter in the representation of citizens' policy views to elected officials is clearly situated in a substantial amount of data and in the analyses of Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) work, with the refinements provided by Bennett and Resnick (1990) somewhat obscured.

We find these somewhat inconsistent conclusions—coupled with the common claim that voters are representative of nonvoters—to be troubling. The substantive conclusion that it does not matter who votes seems especially inconsistent with our basic beliefs about how representative politics work: it is not just that these differences in policy preferences *should* matter in a normative sense but also that common political sense suggests that they *must* matter to some degree for policy outcomes.

Moreover, these conclusions (based on the policy preferences of voters vs. nonvoters) that who votes does not matter contrast with several studies that argue that who votes *does* matter in terms of policy benefits. Hill and Leighley (1992), for example, find that states in which the poor vote as frequently as the wealthy provide significantly higher welfare benefits. Similarly, Martin (2003) finds that members of

Congress allocate federal grant awards to areas where turnout is highest. And, Bartels (2008) finds that elected officials pay more attention to the preferences of the wealthy than the poor, suggesting there is not anonymity among the electorate: not everyone's preferences count the same (see also Gilens [2012]; and Soroka & Wlezien [2010]). It would not be a great leap to suggest that elected officials pay less attention to the preferences of nonvoters than the preferences of voters.

But the key point is that the elected officials are aware of the preferences of their supporters. As we suggested in chapter 1, the poor and the wealthy might well support the same candidate and elect her; but when in office, she will pursue the policies preferred by voters (who are disproportionately wealthy) rather than those preferred by nonvoters (who are disproportionately poor). That means that for poor nonvoters; to achieve substantive representation it is not sufficient for rich voters to prefer the same *candidate* as poor nonvoters. they must also share the same ***issue positions***. This possibility demands that we clearly understand whether voters hold the same policy positions as nonvoters if we are to understand the representational consequences of turnout.

We underscore the importance of this argument by noting that significant differences between voters and nonvoters have important electoral consequences even if voters and nonvoters have identical distributions of preferences across *candidates*. Imagine a world with two dimensions, and that voters who prefer the Republican candidate to the Democratic candidate do so based on economic issues, and voters who prefer the Democratic candidate to the Republican candidate do so based on social issues; but non-voters who prefer the Republican candidate to the Democratic candidate do so based on social issues, and nonvoters who prefer the Democratic candidate to the Republican candidate do so based on economic issues. Assuming that equal proportions of voters and nonvoters prefer Republican candidates to Democratic candidates, it would make no difference to the *electoral outcome* whether the nonvoters stay home or whether they choose to become voters. But if we assume that elected officials know the preferences of those who vote for them and respond to those preferences, then it would make a tremendous difference to *governing outcomes* if the nonvoters choose to vote.

Below we address the question of whether who votes matters, first assessing the representativeness of the policy preferences of voters in the 1972 and the 2008 elections to provide an initial assessment of the extent to which Wolfinger and Rosenstone's classic findings (1980) remain true. We then provide a more detailed assessment regarding trends in the representativeness of voters by examining the policy differences between voters and nonvoters in each presidential election year since 1972. These analyses provide some insight as to whether such representation varies by

issue type and whether any variations we observe reflect election-specific factors or instead reflect more enduring compositional characteristics of voters relative to nonvoters. The latter is especially important from a normative perspective given the notable changes in inequality since the 1980s, while the former is valuable as well in terms of identifying contextual sources—such as candidate positions or the varying salience of different issues over time—of the representativeness of the policy preferences of voters.

We also consider additional data on the representativeness of the policy preferences of voters, relying on the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). This analysis complements our findings based on the time series available in the American National Election Studies (NES) in that it focuses on an additional set of more contemporary policy issues than what the NES time series allows. Our analyses of NES policy positions are drawn from the standard set of 7-point issue scales, along with questions on party identification, political ideology, and presidential candidate thermometer scores available in the NES. Our analyses of the NAES data focus on the set of policy issues asked in the postelection wave of the general election panel survey. In categorizing voters and nonvoters, we rely on the postelection self-report for the NES and on NAES respondents' self-reports on whether they voted in the 2000 election.[3] Specific question wording for both the NES and the NAES policy questions is provided in appendix 6.1.

6.2 Political Differences between Voters and Nonvoters: 1972 and 2008

We begin our comparison of the preferences of voters and nonvoters by considering attitudes on party identification and ideology, and then consider citizens' attitudes on specific issues. Table 6.1 reports the distributions of partisanship for 1972 and 2008 for nonvoters and voters using both the traditional 7-point party identification scale and a collapsed, 3-point scale.[4] Wolfinger and Rosenstone's basic observations (1980) for 1972 remain, with the most notable points being the underrepresentation of independents and the overrepresentation of Republicans among voters

3. We also conducted these analyses using the validated vote for those years when it is available for the NES data, 1976–88, and discuss these results below.
4. Note that the distribution for 1972 is not precisely the same as that reported by Wolfinger & Rosenstone (1980, table 6.2) because we compare the distribution of partisanship among voters with its distribution among nonvoters (rather than the entire population).

Table 6.1. Political Attitudes of Nonvoters and Voters, 1972 and 2008 (NES).

	1972			2008		
	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]
Party ID—7-point Scale						
Strong Democrat	11.1	15.8	4.7	10.6	22.6	12.0
Weak Democrat	29.1	25.1	−4.0	18.5	15.9	−2.6
Lean Democrat	11.6	10.5	−1.1	25.0	13.2	−11.8
Independent	22.0	9.1	−12.9	18.9	5.6	−13.3
Lean Republican	9.9	11.3	2.4	13.3	10.8	−2.5
Weak Republican	11.1	15.4	4.3	9.8	15.3	5.5
Strong Republican	5.2	13.0	7.8	3.8	16.6	12.8
Party ID—3-point Scale						
Democrat	51.8	51.4	−0.5	54.1	51.7	−2.4
Independent	22.0	9.1	−12.9	18.9	5.6	−13.3
Republican	26.2	39.6	13.4	26.9	42.7	15.8
Number of Respondents	595	1,651		397	1,509	
Respondent Ideology[b]						
Liberal	22.8	26.6	3.8	23.5	29.5	6.0
Moderate	45.3	35.4	−9.9	41.0	26.8	−14.2
Conservative	31.8	38.0	6.2	35.5	43.7	8.2
Number of Respondents	311	1,237		297	1,188	

Notes: Entries in the first two columns for each year are column percentages. Entries in the "Difference" column are the difference between the group's share of voters and nonvoters. Computed by the authors using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative File, 1972 and 2008; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

[a] Positive numbers indicate overrepresentation among voters, while negative numbers indicate underrepresentation among voters.

[b] The moderate category includes only respondents who place themselves at the midpoint of the ideology scale.

relative to nonvoters. More specifically, while independents comprised 22 percent of nonvoters in 1972, they comprised only about 9 percent of voters; Republicans comprised about 26 percent of nonvoters and almost 40 percent of voters; and Democrats comprised about 52 percent of both nonvoters and voters.

In 2008, these same patterns can be observed. Independents represented almost 19 percent of nonvoters but only 5.6 percent of voters; Republicans represented nearly 27 percent of nonvoters but over 42 percent of voters; and Democrats comprised between 50 and 55 percent of both

voters and nonvoters. Thus, the underrepresentation of independents and overrepresentation of Republicans is slightly greater in 2008 than in 1972.

Turning to a comparison of the distributions of ideology in 1972 and 2008 we see that moderates are underrepresented among voters in both years, though the underrepresentation is greater in 2008 than in 1972. Liberals and conservatives are overrepresented in both elections, with the overrepresentation of conservatives increasing somewhat more than overrepresentation of liberals in 2008.

To begin our analysis of voters and nonvoters on specific attitudes, in table 6.2 we reexamine the preferences of voters and nonvoters on the four issues that Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) presented from 1972 for which we have data in 2008. On the two economic issues (the government guaranteeing jobs and providing health insurance), nonvoters have more liberal views than voters in both elections, and the gap between them has increased for both issues. In 2008, there is a 10.2 percentage-point difference between nonvoters and voters believing that it is the government's responsibility to guarantee jobs, and a 12.5 percentage-point difference between voters and nonvoters believing that people should "get by on their own." In 1972 these gaps were only 7.8 percentage points and 4.6 percentage points, respectively.

While overall opinion changed on abortion from 1972 to 2008, representativeness on this issue did not change very much. The proportion of individuals taking extreme positions on abortion has increased, and in these extreme positions voters are least representative of nonvoters. For example, from 1972 to 2008, underrepresentation of extreme pro-life positions increased: the gap between nonvoters and voters taking this position was 3.6 percentage points in 1972, compared to a 9.5 percentage-point difference in 2008.

Finally, the issue on which there was the greatest improvement in the representativeness of voters is that of women's roles. Between 1972 and 2008, all segments of the electorate seem to have converged on the response in favor of women's equality. Although there were substantial differences between voters and nonvoters on whether "women's place is in the home" and whether "women are equal," in 1972, in 2008 these differences had all but disappeared. The largest representational bias on this issue remained a liberal one, with almost 87 percent of voters believing that women are equal, compared to only 80 percent of nonvoters.

Thus, in comparing the differences between voters and non-voters, we see both expected and interesting changes between 1972 and 2008. Opinion on the role of women in society has become more widely supportive of equality (at least in the voicing of public policy views),

and in contrast to liberal fears that social issues now serve to mobilize conservatives, it is *liberal* views on abortion that are overrepresented among the voters.[5] For our purposes, however, the more interesting differences between 1972 and 2008 relate to the role of government in providing jobs or health insurance because these issues relate most directly to the possibly distinctive preferences of voters and nonvoters on redistributive issues. We observe here a greater underrepresentation of nonvoters' more liberal positions on these issues in 2008 as compared to 1972. Whether this difference is merely a function of the two particular time points we selected for observation or instead reflects a more fundamental difference between voters and nonvoters is addressed in the next section.

6.3 Who Votes Matters: Policy Differences between Voters and Nonvoters

In this part of the analysis we seek to document more broadly the contours of voters' policy representativeness over time. We want to overcome the potential hazards of comparing the 1972 and 2008 elections as endpoints and instead comment on changes in voter representativeness across the entire time period. This also allows us to assess whether such representativeness shifts slowly—as one might expect were policy views largely structured by the longer-term, enduring demographic predictors of turnout—or whether it reflects more short-term, election-specific factors. To the extent to which we observe the latter we would likely draw some inferences regarding the importance of election specific factors such as elite mobilization and candidate positioning.

According to Meltzer and Richard (1981), periods of increasing inequality should be associated with increased demand for government redistribution. Because we believe that increasing economic inequality was likely accompanied by an increasing divergence in the economic needs and priorities of poorer and wealthier individuals, and that this divergence would be reflected in increasingly distinctive policy preferences across social class (Schlozman, Burns & Verba 1999), we expected to find voters to be less representative—especially on redistributive issues—in 2008 than they were in 1972.

Our evidence on this point is drawn from the biennial American National Election Studies (NES) surveys between 1972 and 2008, which

5. We are of course not claiming that the issue of abortion is causing this overrepresentation of liberal views. The result could simply be caused by wealthy citizens having more liberal views on abortion *and* voting more frequently than poor voters.

Table 6.2. Issue Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters, 1972 and 2008 (NES).

	1972			2008		
	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]
Govt Jobs Scale						
Govt Should Guarantee Jobs	37.1	29.3	−7.8	38.6	28.4	−10.2
Middle of the Road[b]	19.4	24.6	5.2	23.3	20.7	−2.6
People on Their Own	43.5	46.1	2.6	38.1	50.9	12.8
Number of Respondents	490	1,482		207	719	
Govt Health Insurance Scale						
Govt Health Insurance	48.3	43.7	−4.6	59.1	46.6	−12.5
Middle of the Road[b]	15.8	14.2	−1.6	16.0	14.9	−1.1
Private Insurance	35.8	42.1	6.3	24.9	38.5	13.6
Number of Respondents	240	718		460	1,523	
Abortion Legal[c]						
Always	21.3	26.2	4.9	33.4	42.0	8.6
For Personal Reasons (1972)/ For Other Reasons if Need Established (2008)	15.9	18.4	2.5	14.6	18.9	4.3
Only if Woman's Life or Health in Danger (1972)/ Only if Rape, Incest, or Women's Life or Health in Danger (2008)	49.8	45.8	−4.0	29.9	26.5	−3.4
Never	13.2	9.6	−3.6	22.1	12.6	−9.5
Number of Respondents	593	1,621		247	784	
Women's Roles Scale						
Women's Equality	43.7	51.0	7.3	80.3	86.7	6.4
Middle of the Road	16.8	21.2	4.4	11.1	7.4	−3.7
Woman's Place Is Home	39.5	27.8	−11.7	8.7	5.9	−2.8
Number of Respondents	572	1,588		234	776	

Notes: Entries in the first two columns for each year are column percentages. Entries in the "Difference" column are the difference between the group's share of voters and nonvoters. Computed by the authors using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative File, 1972 and 2008; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

[a]Positive numbers indicate overrepresentation among voters, while negative numbers indicate underrepresentation among the voters.

[b]The NES asked different questions on abortion in 1972 and 2008, both with four response categories. In both years, the question included "Always" and "Never" as response categories. In 1972, the additional two categories were: "Only if the mother's life and health of the mother was in danger" and "If, due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty caring for the child." In 2008, the additional two response categories were "Only in the case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger" and "For reasons other than rape, incest or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established." See appendix 6.1 for additional question-wording details.

include a series of policy preference questions asked of voters and nonvoters.[6] We consider citizens' preferences and attitudes as reflected in their political views, their preferences on redistributive issues, and their preferences on values-based issues. Figure 6.1 documents the policy differences between voters and nonvoters in presidential election years between 1972 and 2008, focusing on three redistributive policy questions: support for government spending on health; support for providing services; and support for government guaranteeing jobs (see appendix 6.1 for precise question wording).

We describe these questions as redistributive because they indicate the degree to which respondents support governmental services or policies that redistribute resources to the poor. For each question, respondents

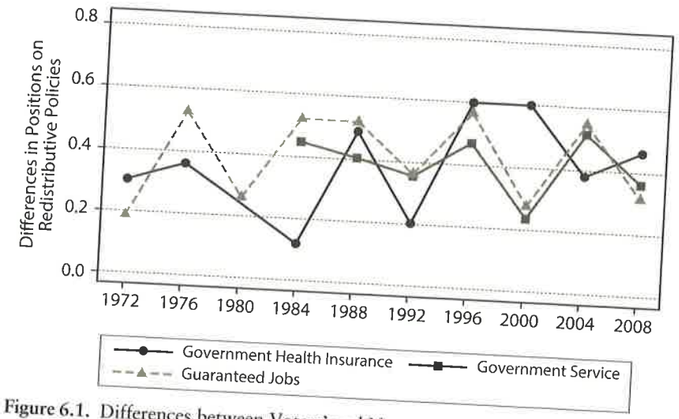

Figure 6.1. Differences between Voters' and Nonvoters' Attitudes on Redistributive Policies, 1972–2008.
Note: Plotted values are the weighted mean difference between voters' and nonvoters' attitudes on each issue in the specified year. Values greater than 0 indicate that voters (as a group) are more conservative than nonvoters (as a group) on the specific policy question; values less than 0 indicate that voters are more liberal than nonvoters. All mean differences are significant at $p < .05$, except 1972 for guaranteed jobs, 1984 for government health insurance, and 2000 for government service. Computed by the authors using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative File, 1972–2008; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

6. The NES is restricted to citizens.

are asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale, with the high point indicating the most conservative policy position (opposing redistribution) and the low point indicating the most liberal policy position (supporting redistribution). In figure 6.1 we plot the difference between the mean score of voters and the mean score of nonvoters on each issue. Positive values thus indicate that voters are more conservative than nonvoters, while negative values indicate that voters are more liberal than nonvoters.

As shown in figure 6.1, we find consistent differences between voters and nonvoters on each of these issues. In each year since 1972, voters are more conservative than are nonvoters in their beliefs regarding how much the government should do to provide jobs, health insurance, and services. More specifically, except for the difference between voters and nonvoters on government health insurance and job guarantees in 1972 and on government health insurance in 1984, the difference between voters and nonvoters is statistically significant in each election. Substantively, the mean differences on all three issues are typically greater than .4 on a 7-point scale. This suggests that voters are about one-half a scale position more conservative than are nonvoters. As we expected, then, there are notable, consistent and substantial differences between voters and nonvoters on redistributive issues—and the conventional wisdom should be updated accordingly.

Next we consider the representativeness of voters on two different sets of issues that we refer to as values-based issues and political attitudes. We present these results in separate graphs. We expect the responses to the first set of questions, including party identification, party ideology, and candidate preference, to be most sensitive to the particular electoral context (i.e., the nature of the issues, campaign strategy, etc.). We therefore expect these attitudes—and candidate preference, in particular—to be most likely to change election by election.

In contrast, the second set of issues are largely motivated by some sense of "values": the role of women/women's equality, aid to blacks, and defense spending. While we are not arguing that this is a coherent set of opinions that share common demographic or attitudinal sources, we do believe that each of these likely reflects more personal, fundamental symbolic beliefs than the other issues we consider. As such, we expect them to likely exhibit little sensitivity to election-specific contexts.

We turn to the representativeness of voters and nonvoters on political attitudes first. The party identification and political ideology measures are based on the standard NES 7-point party identification and political ideology questions.[7] The vote preference measure is based on

7. See appendix 6.1 for details on question wording.

respondents' thermometer rankings of the two major presidential candidates in each election year. We first compute the difference between voters' evaluations of the Republican and Democratic candidates and then compute the same value for nonvoters. We then take the difference between these two scores and then, for graphing purposes, rescale it to be comparable to values on a 7-point scale.

Figure 6.2 presents the mean differences between voters and nonvoters on party identification, political ideology, and candidate vote preference for 1972 through 2008.[8] The values that are plotted for each attitude or preference (i.e., the vertical axis values) are the mean differences between voters and nonvoters for each attitude or preference. Based

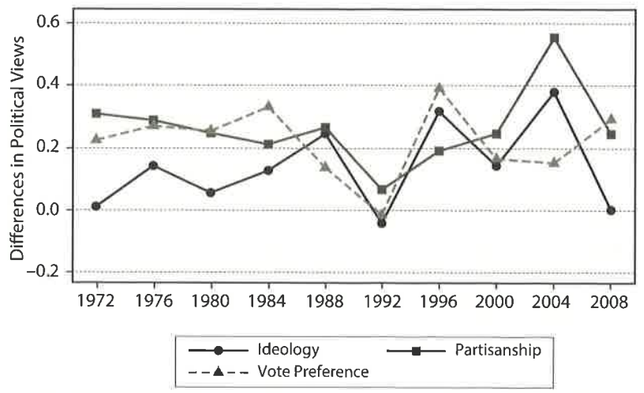

Figure 6.2. Differences between Voters and Nonvoters on Ideology, Partisanship, and Vote Preference.
Note: Plotted values are the weighted mean difference between voters and nonvoters on each opinion item in the specified year. Values greater than 0 indicate that voters (as a group) are more conservative than nonvoters (as a group) on the specific attitude; values less than 0 indicate that voters are more liberal than nonvoters. Mean differences on partisanship (except 1992 and 1996) and vote preference (except 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2004) are significant at $p < .05$. Mean differences on ideology are significant at $p < .05$ only in 1988, 1996, and 2004. Computed by the authors using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative File, 1972–2008; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

8. Mean differences are computed using the NES supplied weights.

on our general knowledge of the interrelationships among partisanship, ideology, and vote choice, we expected these three measures to move largely in sync with each other, and that is mostly what we see. And because vote preference is necessarily tied to candidate characteristics, we see this difference between voters and nonvoters varying the most from election to election, as we would expect.

We note that in many of these elections we observe statistically significant differences between voters and nonvoters on partisanship and vote preference. These differences are statistically significant in six of ten elections for vote preference and eight of ten elections for partisanship. Statistically significant differences between voters and nonvoters on ideology are less common, observed in only two elections, 1988 and 1996, though in seven of the ten elections voters in our sample are ideologically more conservative than nonvoters.[9] Thus we find that voters are more conservative than nonvoters on partisanship, candidate preference, and ideology, although the evidence is more robust for partisanship and candidate preference.

Figure 6.3 presents the mean differences between voters and nonvoters on values-based issues for 1972 through 2008. Our expectations of null findings here are generally supported. The magnitude of the difference between voters and non-voters on aid to blacks and defense spending is generally less than 0.1. Larger differences between voters and nonvoters on women's equality are observed, and are statistically significant in four years (1972, 1980, 1992, and 2000), but even these differences disappear in the two most recent elections. Generally, then, we find little or no systematic differences between voters and nonvoters on these values-based issues.

6.4 A More Detailed Look at Preferences: 2004

To compare the preferences of voters and nonvoters on a broader set of issues we utilize the 2004 NAES. Because the Annenberg policy questions are more timely queries regarding citizens' issue positions than the long-standing questions of political attitudes included on the NES, they provide another perspective on the representativeness of voters in 2004. They also offer the advantage of a substantially larger sample size than the NES.

9. Ideology could be interpreted differently by different respondents, and differently across elections. Some respondents might be emphasizing a social dimension in their evaluation of ideology, others might be emphasizing an economic dimension in their evaluation of ideology.

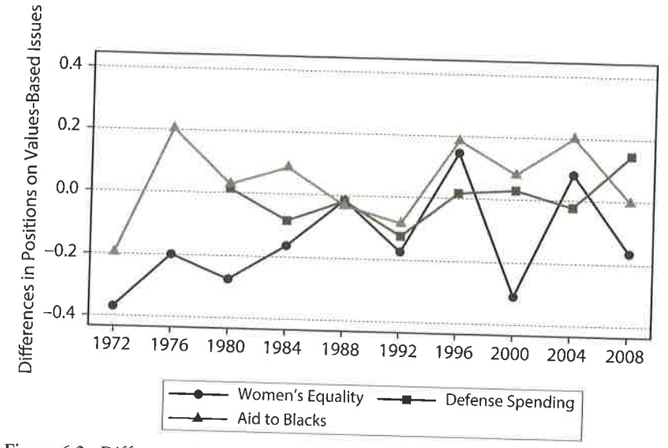

Figure 6.3. Differences between Voters' and Nonvoters' Attitudes on Values-Based Issues.
Note: Plotted values are the weighted mean difference between voters' and nonvoters' attitudes on each issue in the specified year. Values greater than 0 indicate that voters (as a group) are more conservative than nonvoters (as a group) on the specific policy question; values less than 0 indicate that voters are more liberal than nonvoters. Mean differences on women's equality are significant at $p < .05$ in 1972, 1980, 1992, and 2000. Mean differences on aid to blacks are significant at $p < .05$ in 1976. Computed by the authors using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative File, 1972–2008; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

Although the particular questions differ from those used in the NES and reported in earlier tables, we note that these issues, too, can be viewed more broadly as income-based (both tables 6.3 and 6.4), as politically-based (table 6.5), and as values-based (table 6.6). In addition, the NAES also included a series of questions regarding security issues (table 6.7), and legal issues (table 6.8), which we discuss as well.

The NAES offers five questions that we consider to be redistributive in nature: whether the respondent favors making union organizing easier, government health insurance for workers, government health insurance for children, more federal assistance to schools, or increasing the minimum wage. The differences between voters and nonvoters on these issues are reported in table 6.3. We also examine voter and nonvoter attitudes on seven economic policy questions, and these differences are reported in table 6.4. These issues include making permanent the tax

Table 6.3. Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters on Redistributive Issues (NAES 2004).

Issue	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]
Government Health Insurance for Workers			
Favor	82.1	68.1	14.0
(*N*)	(4,959)	(16,795)	
Government Health Insurance for Children			
Favor	88.1	76.6	11.4
(*N*)	(5,140)	(17,378)	
Making Union Organizing Easier			
Favor	65.9	53.5	12.4
(*N*)	(2,663)	(9,146)	
More Federal Assistance to Schools[b]			
Favor	78.6	66.9	11.7
(*N*)	(7,559)	(24,559)	
Increasing the Minimum Wage			
Favor	88.3	80.5	7.8
(*N*)	(1,105)	(3,851)	

Notes: Cell entries in columns 1 and 2 are the percentage of respondents favoring the policy identified in each row, with the number of cases in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, the percentage favoring consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat favor*, *favor*, or *strongly favor* the policy. The complement of each reported percentage is made of all respondents who said they *somewhat oppose*, *oppose*, *neither favor nor oppose*, *strongly oppose*, *don't know*, or refused to answer. Cell entries in the "Difference" column are the difference between the percentage of nonvoters and voters favoring each issue. Computed by the authors from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

[a] Higher values indicate that the nonvoters are more liberal than the voters on the issue. Each difference is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

[b] This "favorable" category includes those who responded that they wanted more federal assistance to schools. The complement of this reported percentage is made of all respondents who said they wanted the same amount, less, or no federal assistance to schools and those who said *don't know* or refused to answer.

cuts enacted during the administration of President George W. Bush, school vouchers, trade agreements, investing Social Security in the stock market, eliminating overseas tax breaks, eliminating the estate tax, and reimporting drugs.[10] Note that the format of the Annenberg questions

10. See appendix 6.1 for a fuller description of the NAES questions and the notes in tables 6.3 and 6.4 for additional details on our coding of responses.

Table 6.4. Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters on Economic Policies (NAES 2004).

Issue	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference[a]
Making Bush Tax Cuts Permanent			
Favor	53.8	54.3	−0.50
(*N*)	(4,266)	(14,652)	
School Vouchers			
Favor	53.2	46.4	6.8
(*N*)	(15,154)	(49,572)	
More Trade Agreements			
Favor	46.1	40.3	5.7
(*N*)	(15,154)	(49,572)	
Social Security in the Stock Market			
Favor	57.0	54.5	2.5
(*N*)	(11,413)	(37,642)	
Eliminating Overseas Tax Breaks to Cut Taxes for Companies that Create Jobs			
Favor	71.4	74.0	−2.6
(*N*)	(4,037)	(13,996)	
Eliminating the Estate Tax			
Favor	58.2	64.4	−6.1
(*N*)	(4,593)	(15,363)	
Re-importing Drugs			
Favor	72.0	77.1	−5.1
(*N*)	(5,990)	(20,318)	

Notes: Cell entries in columns 1 and 2 are the percentage of respondents favoring the policy identified in each row, with the number of cases in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, the percentage favoring consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat favor*, *favor*, or *strongly favor* the policy. The complement of each reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat oppose*, *oppose*, *neither favor nor oppose*, *strongly oppose*, *don't know*, or refused to answer. Cell entries in the "Difference" column are the difference between the percentage of nonvoters and voters favoring each issue. Computed by the authors using data from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

[a] Higher values indicate that the nonvoters are more favorable than voters on the issue. Each difference (except on Bush tax cuts) is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

generally is to ask whether respondents favor or oppose a policy. When respondents were given the option to say whether they strongly favor or strongly oppose, we collapsed the categories into favor or oppose. Thus, in the tables that follow, we present the proportion of voters who say they favor the policy, compared to the proportion of nonvoters who favor the policy.

The largest differences between voters and nonvoters across the entire set of issues we describe are almost all on redistributive issues (as reported in table 6.3). On every redistributive issue except one, the difference in support between voters and nonvoters is over 11 percentage points. The largest difference observed is 14.7 percentage points on support for government health insurance for workers. And on every issue it is the nonvoters who have the more liberal position overall. Only on support for increasing the minimum wage is the difference less than 11 percentage points, and that is mostly because even voters support this.

On most of the economic policy questions (reported in table 6.4) we also see differences between voters and nonvoters, but here it is more difficult to characterize these differences as either more liberal or more conservative. What we can report is that voters are significantly less favorable than nonvoters on school vouchers, creating more trade agreements, and having social security in the stock market. Voters are significantly more favorable than nonvoters on eliminating overseas tax breaks, eliminating the estate tax, and reimporting drugs.

The distribution of responses to the redistributive questions we saw on the previous table compared to the smaller difference between groups we see on the more complicated economic questions on this table do an excellent job of illustrating our point: the voters may be representative of the electorate on some issues, but they are *not* representative of the electorate on issues that go to the core of the role of government in modern democracies.

Respondents' self-reports on party identification and ideology in the 2004 NAES, as shown in table 6.5, broadly follow the contours identified in the 2004 NES, with Republicans being overrepresented among voters compared to their proportion of nonvoters. As shown in table 6.5, Republicans make up 34.5 percent of voters compared to 18.4 percent of nonvoters, and conservatives comprise 38.2 percent of voters and 32.2 percent of nonvoters. Both surveys suggest that conservatives are also overrepresented among voters, but the magnitude of these differences is smaller than those for partisanship.[11]

11. Given the difference in question design, we do not make too much of the small differences here.

Table 6.5. Political Attitudes of Nonvoters and Voters (NAES 2004).

Identification	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference
Party ID[a]			
Democrat	28.4	33.3	4.9
Independent	32.1	25.2	−7.0
Republican	18.4	34.5	16.0
Other	21.1	7.1	−14.0
N	(18,885)	(62,537)	
Ideology[b]			
Liberal	24.0	23.3	−0.7
Moderate	43.8	38.5	−5.3
Conservative	32.2	38.2	6.0
N	(18,885)	(62,537)	

Notes: Entries are computed by authors using data from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

[a]Respondents who identified as *strong*, *moderate*, or *weak* Democrats/Republicans are coded as partisans. Respondents who said *don't know* or refused to respond are classified as other.

[b]Respondents who said they were *conservative* or *very conservative* are classified as conservative; respondents who said they were *liberal* or *very liberal* are classified as liberal. Respondents who said they were *moderate*, *don't know*, or refused to answer are classified as moderate.

Table 6.6 presents nine issues included in the NAES postelection study that measure what we have termed values-based issues, though this categorization is perhaps too broad for this large set of diverse issues. Five of these issues focus on abortion or stem cell research funding and legality, two focus on same-sex marriage issues, and two focus on gun control. The largest difference between voters and nonvoters on these issues is only 6 percentage points and is on the question of gun control, where over 62 percent of nonvoters favor increased gun control, compared to only 56 percent of voters. Every other observed difference is less than 5 percentage points, and the direction of bias is not consistent: sometimes more liberal positions are favored, sometimes more conservative positions are favored by the voters compared to the nonvoters. Thus, on these values issues, we do not see the set of voters as being unrepresentative of the electorate.

The NAES includes data on seven "security" issues ranging from those focusing on the war in Iraq, to military spending, the 9/11 Commission recommendations and the Patriot Act. We can see in table 6.7 that, with one exception, the differences between voters and nonvoters on these

Table 6.6. Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters on Values-Based Issues (NAES 2004).

Issue	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference
More Gun Control[a]			
Favor	62.5	56.5	−6.0
(*N*)	(8,323)	(27,393)	
Assault Weapons Ban			
Favor	69.5	74.4	4.8
(*N*)	(3,279)	(10,662)	
State Law Allowing Same-sex Marriage			
Favor	31.8	32.0	1.7
(*N*)	(4,915)	(15,811)	
Stem Cell Research Funding			
Favor	63.7	67.6	3.9
(*N*)	(2,979)	(10,165)	
Banning Late-term Abortions			
Favor	41.5	44.0	2.5
(*N*)	(6,085)	(20,044)	
Federal Marriage Amendment			
Favor	38.6	41.1	2.5
(*N*)	(18,885)	(62,537)	
Additional Stem Cell Lines			
Favor	66.7	62.9	−3.8
(*N*)	(1,376)	(4,646)	
Making Abortion More Difficult			
Favor	37.0	36.7	−0.2
(*N*)	(2,436)	(8,373)	
Banning All Abortions			
Favor	32.4	28.9	−3.5
(*N*)	(15,237)	(49,810)	

Notes: Entries are computed by the authors using data from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

Entries in columns 1 and 2 are the percentage of respondents favoring the policy identified in each row, with the number of cases in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, the percentage favoring consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat favor*, *favor*, or *strongly favor* the policy. The complement of each reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat oppose*, *oppose*, *neither favor nor oppose*, *strongly oppose*, *don't know*, or refused to answer. All differences are statistically significant at greater than 95 percent confidence level except for "Making Abortion More Difficult."

[a]This percentage represents those who responded that they wanted more gun control. The complement of this reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they wanted the same amount, less, or no gun control and those who said don't know or refused to answer.

Table 6.7. Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters on Security Issues (NAES 2004).

Issue	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference
Keeping Troops in Iraq until Govt. Stable			
Favor	43.0	60.6	−17.6
(*N*)	(11,271)	(38,041)	
911 Commission Recommendations			
Favor	44.5	48.6	−4.1
(*N*)	(1,215)	(4,097)	
Spending More on Rebuilding Iraq			
Favor	10.5	8.3	2.2
(*N*)	(7,559)	(24,559)	
Moving Troops from Europe and Korea			
Favor	55.4	57.7	−2.3
(*N*)	(2,356)	(8,139)	
Spending More on Homeland Security			
Favor	51.7	49.1	2.5
(*N*)	(7,559)	(24,559)	
Spending More on Military[a]			
Favor	42.1	45.4	−3.3
(*N*)	(7,559)	(24,559)	
Patriot Act Is Good for Country[b]			
Favor	54.6	56.6	−2.0
(*N*)	(6,616)	(21,591)	

Notes: Entries are computed by the authors using data from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

Entries in columns 1 and 2 are the percentage of respondents favoring the policy identified in each row, with the number of cases in parentheses. Unless otherwise noted, the percentage favoring consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat favor*, *favor*, or *strongly favor* the policy. The complement of each reported percentage is made of all respondents who said they *somewhat oppose*, *oppose*, *neither favor nor oppose*, *strongly oppose*, *don't know*, or refused to answer. All differences are statistically significant at greater than 95 percent confidence level except for "911 Recommendations."

[a] This percentage represents those who responded that they wanted more spending on the military. The complement of this reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they wanted the same amount, less, or no spending on the military and those who said *don't know* or refused to answer.

[b] This percentage represents those who responded that the Patriot Act was good for the country. The complement of this reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they thought the Patriot Act was *neither good nor bad*, *bad*, *don't know*, or refused to answer.

Table 6.8. Preferences of Nonvoters and Voters on Legal Policies (NAES 2004).

Issue	% of Nonvoters	% of Voters	Difference
Limiting Malpractice Awards			
Favor	53.1	64.4	−11.3
(*N*) *p*-value	(1,749)	(6,027)	
Limiting Lawsuits			
Favor	56.4	69.3	−12.8
(*N*) *p*-value	(1,921)	(6,574)	

Notes: Computed by the authors using data from the National Annenberg Election Study, 2004; see appendix 6.1 for question-wording details.

Unless otherwise noted, the percentage favoring consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat favor*, *favor*, or *strongly favor* the policy. The complement of each reported percentage consists of all respondents who said they *somewhat oppose*, *oppose*, *neither favor nor oppose*, *strongly oppose*, *don't know*, or refused to answer. All differences are statistically significant at greater than 95 percent confidence level.

issues are, as in the case of the values-based issues from the NES, quite modest. The most dramatic exception is on support for keeping troops in Iraq or bringing them home, in which case there is more than a 15 percentage-point difference between nonvoters and voters, with voters preferring that the troops stay in Iraq. The difference in support for keeping troops in Iraq is striking; it might be because voters are less likely than nonvoters to have relatives serving there. But it is a fascinating example of the voters *not* being representative of the electorate on a vitally important public policy issue.

Finally, in table 6.8 we report significant and large differences in the legal policy attitudes of voters compared to nonvoters. There is a substantial difference between the two groups on limiting malpractice awards, with voters more strongly supportive of such limitations than nonvoters. An even larger difference appears on the question of limiting lawsuit awards, with nearly 70 percent of voters supporting such limitations, compared to only 56 percent of nonvoters. These figures are consistent with the more conservative positions taken by voters on the redistributive issues we examined earlier.

All told, our findings on the large and consistent differences in the redistributive policy positions of voters versus nonvoters that we observed in the case of a limited number of broad policy issues included in the NES are sustained when examining more timely and detailed policy positions drawn from the NAES data. The magnitude of the differences observed on values-based and policy-oriented questions pales in comparison to what we find for economic issues.

And so we repeat: voters are *not* representative of nonvoters on redistributive issues. This has been true since 1972, in every election and for every redistributive issue we examine.[12]

6.5 Conclusion

Our initial interest in evaluating the representativeness of voters in contemporary American politics was stimulated largely by normative concerns associated with representation in modern democratic societies. The conventional wisdom established by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) is that it does not matter who votes because voters and nonvoters share similar policy preferences. However, they noted that this was based on a comparison of preferences across a wide range of issues, and that in fact voters and nonvoters did differ on particular issues. In our analysis of preferences of voters and nonvoters across ten elections, we, too, find that on some issues voters are more liberal than nonvoters; that on some issues voters are more conservative than nonvoters; and that on some issues, voters' and nonvoters' preferences are about the same. Yet the pattern Wolfinger and Rosenstone described for 1972 obscures the distinct difference between the preferences of voters and non-voters on issues related to redistributive policies. We consistently find on issues of economic redistribution—those issues most related to income and economic inequality—voters have more conservative policy preferences than nonvoters.

Revising the conventional wisdom according to our evidence is thus important in both normative and practical empirical respects. Both elected officials and citizens alike tend to think of elections as mandates of sorts, though it is extremely difficult to know what policies they are mandates for. Elections merely record which candidate is preferred by a majority of the voters to the other candidate. Elections do *not* record the reasons for the choices of those voters. The outcomes of elections do not tell us what specific preferences motivate voters to choose one candidate over the other. What our work has shown is that the electoral victory of any one candidate cannot be presumed to be reflective of the broader electorate in terms of preferences on redistributive policies.

12. We also examined voter/nonvoter preferences based on the NES validated vote measure for the limited number of years for which it is available. Our general findings hold when comparing validated voters and validated nonvoters: there are few differences on values-based issues for voters versus nonvoters; there are differences in partisanship and vote preference, but not ideology, for voters versus nonvoters; and for most observations, there are significant differences between voters and nonvoters on redistributive issues, though the magnitude of these differences is smaller than when we use the self-reported vote.

We have offered in this chapter a more extended analysis of the extent to which voters represent nonvoters. We take issue with the claim that voters are indeed representative of nonvoters. Our evidence deviates from that offered by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) in one very important respect: in every election year from 1972 through 2008, voters and nonvoters differ substantively on most issues relating to the role of government in redistributive policies. In addition to these differences being evident in every election since 1972, we also note that the nature of the electoral bias is clear as well: voters are substantially more conservative than nonvoters on redistributive issues.

Appendix 6.1: Survey Question Wording

A6.1.1 The American National Election Studies

Representative introductions to the 7-point scale responses are included below:

- Government Health Insurance: There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance like Blue Cross or some other company paid plans. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
- Government Guaranteeing Jobs: Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his/her own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
- Government Services: Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Other people feel that it is important for

the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

- Women's Roles: Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that a woman's place is in the home. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
- Aid to blacks: Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6). Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about it?
- Defense Spending: Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Representative question wording used to measure political views between 1972 and 2008:

- Party Identification: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what? (IF REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT) Would you call yourself a strong (REP/DEM) or a not very strong (REP/DEM)? (IF INDEPENDENT, OTHER [1966 AND LATER: OR NO PREFERENCE]:) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?
- Ideology: We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, extremely conservative, or haven't you thought much about this?

- Candidate/Vote Preference (1978 and later): I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 mean that you feel favorably and warm toward the person; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one.
- Abortion (1972 and 1976): There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?

  1. Abortion should never be permitted.
  2. Abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman is in danger.
  3. Abortion should be permitted if, due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty in caring for the child.
  4. Abortion should never be forbidden, since one should not require a woman to have a child she doesn't want.

- Abortion (1980 and later): There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?

  1. By law, abortion should never be permitted.
  2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger.
  3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.
  4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

A6.1.2 The National Annenberg Election Study

Question wording for the policy preference questions is provided below. Possible response categories are included in tables 6.3 and 6.4.

- Making Union Organizing Easier: Do you favor or oppose making it easier for labor unions to organize?

- Government Health Insurance for Children: Do you favor or oppose the federal government helping to pay for health insurance for all children?
- Social Security in the Stock Market: Do you favor or oppose allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market?
- School Vouchers: Do you favor or oppose the federal government giving tax credits or vouchers to parents to help send their children to private schools?
- Favoring Federal Assistance for Schools: Providing financial assistance to public elementary and secondary schools—should the federal government spend more on it, the same as now, less, or no money at all?
- Favoring Military Spending: Military defense—should the federal government spend more on it, the same as now, less, or no money at all?
- Reinstateing the Draft: Do you think the United States should put the military draft back into operation?
- Spending to Rebuild Iraq: Rebuilding Iraq—should the federal government spend more on it, the same as now, less, or no money at all?
- Troops in Iraq: Do you think the United States should keep troops in Iraq until a stable government is established there, or do you think the United States should bring its troops home as soon as possible?
- Implementing 9/11 Commission Recommendations: As you may know, the 9/11 Commission has recently released its final report on what the government knew about potential terrorist attacks before 9/11, and made recommendations on what the government should do to prevent future attacks. Based on what you know about the report, do you think the government should adopt all of the commission's recommendations, most of them, just some of them, or none of them?
- Gun Control: Restricting the kinds of guns people can buy—should the federal government do more about it, do the same as now, do less about it, or do nothing at all?
- Assault Weapons Ban: The current federal law banning assault weapons is about to expire. Do you think the U.S. Congress should pass this law again, or not?
- Banning All Abortions: The federal government banning all abortions—do you favor or oppose the federal government doing this?

- Making Abortion More Difficult: Laws making it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion—do you favor or oppose this?
- Party Identification: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democratic, a Republican, an independent, or something else?
- Ideology: Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?